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ABSTRACT

Two research projects focused on the nature of verb choice and its relationship to a composition's general effectiveness and reader impact. In the pilot project, 28 fifth grade students received an instructional unit of 27 lessons emphasizing the incorporation of precise verb vocabulary and the elimination of forms of "to be" and "to have" as main verbs. In addition to receiving the highest mean score from the holistic readers, the group's posttests yielded statistically significant differences in areas of verb choice and syntax in relation to their pretests and to the posttest written by 28 fifth grade students in a control group. The second project involved an analysis of 112 holistically evaluated competency examinations written by senior high school students. The data revealed direct correlations between a composition's competency rating and the quality of the verb vocabulary. Both research projects indicate the important relationship between precise verb choice and effective writing and lend support for developing new approaches to composition curriculum. (Author/RL)

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Verb Choice and Its Relationship to a Composition's Effectiveness as Measured by Holistic Evaluation

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Running Head: Verb Choice and Its Relationship to Effective Composition

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Verb Choice and Its Relationship to a Composition's Effectiveness as Measured by Holistic Evaluation

For achieving effective composition many educators and a handful of researchers have advocated a lexical approach, emphasizing vigorous vocabulary as a means to success. These advocates urge that writers choose "precise words" (Jenkinson & Seybold, 1970, p. 24) and recognize a word's connotative powers (Corbin, 1966; Daringer, 1930). Some of the lexical proponents give special consideration to verb choice and the importance of choosing "vivid", "vigorous", and active verbs (Applegate, 1961; Carlson, 1968; Macrorie, 1968; Strunk, 1959). They also caution the writer about excessive use of forms of "to be" (Applegate, 1963). Macrorie (1968) coins several terms associated with weak verb choice, including "Is-ness" and "There-ache" (p. 93).

The studies reported here are based upon the hypothesis that a correlation exists between verb choice and a composition's total effectiveness. The initial project dealt with an experimental composition curriculum taught to a fifth-grade class. The second research study involved an analysis of senior high school composition competency examinations. Both studies focused on verb choice in student writing and the relationship between verb choice and a composition's general impact on the reader.

Related Studies

Little research exists in the area of vocabulary and its relationship to effective writing. Daigon (1966), using a computerized program, suggests that the more sophisticated the vocabulary, the higher the evaluation; and he notes that a student's use of the "uncommon word" has "proved to be one of the most significant single predictors of skilled human judgment" (p. 50). Finn (1977) takes a similar view; and his findings, based on word frequency, reinforce those of Daigon.

Most research related to verb choice has taken into account verb frequency, verb structure, and types of verbs used (such as linking verbs). Potter (1967) observes in his study on sentence structure and prose quality that more verbal structures of every type appeared in the better papers. Hunt (1965) evaluates the role of verbs as modifiers of nouns, noting that their frequency almost doubles from Grade Four to Grade Twelve. He also specifically mentions the frequency of the verb "to be" in the writing of twelfth graders and suggests that, as an alternative, "an intensifier after the form of to be can become a modifier of the noun" (p. 105). Loban (1976) is generally concerned with the proportion of verbs in writing and their structural nature. Loban's findings support the hypothesis that students rated high in language will use a higher percentage of verbs in communicating. Loban concludes that the High group

replaced "cumbersome dependent clauses with more efficient subordination (infinite phrases and clauses, participle and gerund phrases)" (p. 73). Loban comments that an investigation concerned with "vivid, unusual, and precise verbs . . . seems an important study for the future" (p. 18).

STUDY 1

The first study examined (1) the effects of a composition unit emphasizing verb choice on fifth graders' descriptive writing and (2) the relationship between verb choice and a composition's general effectiveness as measured by holistic evaluation.

Design

Subjects

Two fifth-grade classes served as the experimental and control groups. Each class contained twenty-eight students and similar proportions of gifted, regular, and educationally handicapped students. There were no significant differences between classes as measured by their mean percentile scores on the reading and language arts sections of the SRA Assessment Survey Series, Iowa Tests of Educational Development.

Procedure

In October a pretest, in which students were asked to describe their classroom, was administered to the experimental group. Following the pretest, the experimental group received a forty-five minute lesson emphasizing the use of precise verbs, once a week for a period of 27 weeks. In

June a posttest was administered to students in both the experimental and control classes, which required that students write a descriptive paragraph based on a poster.

Instructional Unit

The composition unit emphasized two aspects of vocabulary: the elimination of forms of "to be" and "to have" as main verbs and the incorporation of vivid verb vocabulary. To foster greater awareness of verb choice and structure, the researcher employed a variety of activities, which included alphabetical warm-up drills; single sentence descriptions of cartoons, poems, books, and student models; paragraphs about school subjects and posters; and verb analysis.

The control group used the district-approved language arts textbook (Fillmer, et al., 1974), which provides a variety of descriptive assignments. However, in this textbook content is emphasized as the measure of success, and few prescriptive guidelines are offered regarding vocabulary and sentence structure.

Methods of Analysis

Individual areas of analysis. The researcher evaluated each composition in three general areas, which were divided into a total of 15 subareas in the following manner:

1. Verb Choice
   - 1.1 "To be" and "to have": The total number of forms of "to be" and "to have" used as main verbs.
   - 1.2 Generalized verbs: The total number of verbs and

verbal forms with generalized meanings, such as "show", "sleep", and "look".

1.3 Particularized verbs: The total number of verbs and verbal forms with precise meanings, such as "depict", "snooze", and "glare".

1.4 The total number of verbs and verbals used in the composition.

1.5 The Verb Evaluation Score, which was calculated by awarding a composition points for generalized and precise verbs and by penalizing compositions for excessive repetition and use of "to be" and "to have" as main verbs.

1.6 The percentage of (1) forms of "to be" and "to have" used as main verbs, (2) generalized verbs, and (3) particularized verbs used in each composition.

2. Syntax

2.1 The total number of words in a composition.

2.2 The total number of complex sentences.

2.3 The total number of subordinate clauses.

2.4 The total number of subordinate clauses containing main verbs other than "to be" and "to have".

2.5 The total number of sentence fragments.

2.6 The total number of T-units: in the evaluation each T-unit received 1 point and each sentence fragment received half a point.

3. Details

3.1 Total number of nouns used in a composition.

3.2 The total number of adjectives used in a composition.

3.3 The ratio of adjectives to the total number of details, including both nouns and adjectives.

Holistic evaluation. Three elementary school teachers from an adjacent community, who were experienced holistic readers, were hired to rate a total of 76 pretests and posttests. As a guideline, the evaluators employed the rubrics for evaluating student writing used by the local high school district to assess the district's competency exams. This set of guidelines requires that the rater give each composition a score of from one (low) to nine (high), based on the reader's general impression of the composition's total impact and effectiveness, taking into consideration mechanics, structure, breadth of insight, and creativity. After each rater evaluated the 76 compositions, the three raters' scores were totaled in computing the data, creating the potential range of scores from 3 to 27.

Statistical analysis: Three sets of papers were involved in evaluations for statistical significance: the experimental group's pretests, the experimental group's posttests, and the control group's posttests. Three types of data analysis served to compute the significant results: (1) Related pairs of compositions written by students in the experimental group were compared to show changes experienced by students who received the verb-oriented instructional unit. (2) The posttests of the experimental and control groups were compared as

whole. (3) The data was examined to see what correlations could be seen between the holistic evaluation score and (a) the number of verbs used in a composition and (b) the composition's verb evaluation score.

Results

General Findings

In general, the results indicated statistically significant improvements made by the experimental group in areas of verb choice and syntax when their posttests were compared to their pretests and to the posttests of the control group.

Comparison of Experimental Group's Pretests and Posttests

Verb Choice. Inspection of Table 1 reveals that significant differences occurred in every subarea except generalized verbs and total number of verbs per composition. Analysis of the data showed that posttests written by the experimental group displayed significant gains in incorporating sophisticated, precise verb vocabulary. On *t*-tests for related means, significant differences were obtained for the Verb Evaluation Score ($t(19)=6.02$, $p < .001$), Particularized Verbs ($t(19)=4.02$, $p < .001$), and Forms of "To Be" and "To Have" ($t(19)=3.14$, $p < .01$). On *z*-tests for differences between two proportions, significant differences were obtained for the percentage of Forms of "To Be" and "To Have" ($z=2.30$, $p < .05$) and Particularized Verbs ($z=2.01$, $p < .05$).

Insert Table 1 about here

Syntax. Analysis of the data showed that the experimental group's posttests contained significantly fewer sentence fragments than their pretests ($t(19)=2.15$, $p < .05$). Table 2 contains the mean differences in the areas of Syntax, Details, and Holistic Evaluation.

Insert Table 2 about here

Holistic Evaluation Score. A t-test for related means indicated that the posttests received significantly higher scores from the holistic readers ($t(19)=3.47$, $p < .01$).

Comparison of Experimental and Control Groups' Posttests

Verb Choice. Table 1 illustrates the stronger verb choice displayed in the experimental group's posttests in comparison to the control group's posttests. T-tests for finding the difference between two independent means indicated that significant differences occurred in the areas of the Verb Evaluation Score ($t(52)=5.05$, p .001), Particularized Verbs ($t(52)=3.44$, p .01), and Generalized Verbs ($t(52)=2.79$, $p < .01$). The data also showed that the experimental group's posttests contained significantly fewer forms of "To Be" and "To Have" as main verbs ($t(52)=3.33$, p .01). On z-tests for differences between proportions, significant differences occurred in the percentage of Forms of "To Be" and "To Have" ($z=2.17$, $p < .05$) and Particularized Verbs ($z=1.97$, $p < .05$).

Syntax. Examination of the data revealed that the experimental

group's posttests contained fewer sentence fragments and more sophisticated structure than the posttests of the control group. On *t*-tests for finding the difference between two independent means, significant differences occurred in the areas of Sentence Fragments ($t(52)=4.16$, $p < .001$), Complex Sentences ($t(52)=2.10$, $p < .05$), Subordinate Clauses ($t(52)=2.10$, $p < .05$), and Subordinate Clauses not containing forms of "to be" and "to have" as main verbs ($t(52)=3.19$, $p < .01$).

Correlations Between Holistic Evaluation and the Use of Verbs

As shown in Table 3, tests for statistical significance using Spearman rank-order correlation (*rho*) indicated that positive correlations existed between the holistic scores and both the quantity of verbs used in a composition and the quality of verbs as determined by the Verb Evaluation Score. In each set of compositions a statistically significant correlation occurred with holistic scores and the number of verbs used in a composition. In the experimental group's posttests a correlation also occurred between the holistic scores and the Verb Evaluation Scores ($t(26)=3.64$, $p < .01$).

Insert Table 3 about here

Conclusions

The data from the study of a verb-oriented instructional unit taught to a fifth-grade class lend support to the researcher's hypothesis that a correlation exists between verb

choice [illegible] and a composition's effectiveness. The study yields two main conclusions: first, verb vocabulary can be improved by means of a verb-oriented composition course; and second, such emphasis improves specific areas related to syntax and to the general impact made by the composition as judged by holistic evaluators.

STUDY 2

The second study examined the relationship between raters' holistic scores and various aspects of composition, including length and verb choice.

Method

Sample

As part of a competency examination, 1500 senior high school students in a suburban northern California school district were asked to describe a situation which had changed their life and discuss how this had affected them. Each composition was scored from one (low) to nine (high) by two holistic readers, who served on a holistic evaluation team trained to use the school district's rubric of guidelines (the same rubrics used in Study 1).

For the present study, 112 of these compositions were analyzed further. Because those compositions which had received a total of six points or less from the two readers had been returned to the classroom teachers, the researcher's investigation was limited to compositions which had received scores totaling seven to eighteen. The researcher randomly selected 20 papers from the lowest group of remaining scores,

which had received one 3 and one 4. These compositions had been considered sufficiently competent by district guidelines to meet school and state competency requirements. The researcher labeled this group "3+". Then 20 compositions were randomly selected from each of the succeeding groups which had received double scores of 4, 5, 6, and 7 (totaling 8, 10, 12, and 14, respectively). Because so few compositions had been awarded double scores of 8 and 9, random selection was not possible in the two highest groups. All compositions which had received double scores of 8 (a total of 11 compositions) and 9 (only one composition out of 1500) were used in the study.

Methods of Analysis

Individual areas of analysis. Each composition was analyzed in seven areas, two concerned with length and five concerned with verb choice.

1. Length
   - 1.1 The total number of words in the composition
   - 1.2 The total number of T-units
2. Verb Choice
   - 2.1 "To be" and "to have" (according to the guidelines established in Study 1)
   - 2.2 Generalized verbs (as in Study 1)
   - 2.3 Particularized verbs (as in Study 1)
   - 2.4 Verb repetition: A verb repeated three or more times was counted each time it appeared.

2.5 The Verb Evaluation Score (which followed guidelines similar to those used in Study 1)

Statistical analysis. Correlation coefficients were calculated to examine the relationship between each of the seven areas listed above and the holistic evaluation score. In addition, twenty-three compositions from Groups 3+ to 9, in which length was a constant, were selected to calculate the relationship between verb quality as measured by the Verb Evaluation Score and reader impact as measured by the holistic evaluation score.

Analysis by group. In addition to each of the seven areas listed above, the mean result for each competency score group was also calculated for (1) the number of words per T-unit, (2) the total number of verbs, (3) the total number of verbs per 100 words, (4) forms of "to be" and "to have" used as main verbs per 100 words, (5) generalized verbs per 100 words, (6) particularized verbs per 100 words, and (7) the verb ratio (the percentage of forms of "to be" and "to have" as main verbs, generalized verbs, and particularized verbs). Although these results were not part of the formal analysis for statistical significance, they were intended to show the subtle differences which existed between compositions placed in various competency score groups.

Results

General Findings

In general, the results of the statistical analysis suggest that positive correlations exist between a compo-

sition's holistic score and (1) its length and (2) the quality of its verb choice. The complete set of data for the mean results in the areas of length and verb choice by competency score group is found in Table 4.

Insert Table 4 about here

Composition and T-Unit Length

Positive correlations existed between a composition's holistic score and its length and the total number of T-units. The Pearson product-moment correlation yielded a value of $r=.632$ ($p < .001$) in regard to holistic score and length and a value of $r=.612$ ($p < .001$) in relation to holistic score and the number of T-units.($n=112$).

Verb Choice

Positive correlations existed between a composition's holistic score and its Verb Evaluation Score ($r=.647$, $p < .001$) and the number of particularized verbs ($r= .557$, $p < .001$).($n=112$). A comparison of 23 compositions which contained from 250-300 words yielded a positive correlation between holistic score and Verb Evaluation Score ($r=.462$, $p < .05$).

Inspection of Table 4 reveals in a variety of areas a shift in verb choice in the competency score groups. The table indicates that the percentage of forms of "to be" and "to have" used as main verbs declined from 28.31% to 18.64% while the percentage of particularized verbs rose from 6.31% in Group 3+ to 9.66% and 18.64% in Groups 8 and 9, respectively. These data

are reinforced upon examination of the number of the verbs in each of the three categories used per 100 words. Although the total number of forms of "to be" and "to have" increased from 9.2 in Group 3+ to over 11 in Groups 6-9, they showed a decrease per 100 words from 4.81 (Group 3+) to 2.5 (Group 9). On the other hand, the number of particularized verbs per 100 words showed an increase from 1.07 (Group 3+) to 1.52, 1.49, and 2.5 (Groups 7, 8, and 9, respectively). Examination of the data also revealed that the total verb repetitions per composition and per 100 words peaked in the middle competency score groups (4-6) and dramatically declined in the compositions in the three highest groups.

Conclusions

The data from the study of competency examinations written by senior high school students appears to reinforce the researcher's hypothesis that a significant correlation exists between a composition's effectiveness as judged by holistic evaluation and the quality of the verb choice. The results indicated that the compositions which received the highest scores from raters also contained significantly more particularized verbs, a significantly higher Verb Evaluation Score, the highest percentage of precise verbs, the lowest percentage of forms of "to be" and "to have" used as main verbs, and the lowest occurrence of verb repetition. Although composition length and the number of T-units were shown to have a positive correlation with a composition's holistic

score, an analysis of data where length was a constant revealed a significant positive correlation between the holistic score and the quality of verb choice as indicated by the Verb Evaluation Score.

Discussion

Limitations

Study 1 was limited to one type of writing (descriptive) taught to one class of elementary school students by one instructor. Studies in the future might include greater numbers of students in a variety of settings, with each class having a different instructor.

Study 2 was limited to an analysis of one type of writing (descriptive essay), written by senior high school students in a single California district. Because of circumstances, the researcher was unable to evaluate those compositions which had been deemed incompetent (having received a total score or 6 or less). Future studies should include random selection of compositions which represent the entire range of holistic evaluation scores. This study might be replicated with students in other grade levels and with a variety of modes of composition.

Implications

If the researcher's hypothesis is valid, it would appear that an approach emphasizing verb choice might be relevant for researchers and educators. Future investigations might be concerned with the relationship between verb choice and changes in syntax and verb structure, motivation, editing,

revision, and the composing process in general. Such studies might lend support for developing new approaches to composition curriculum.

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Table 1

Comparison of the Mean Differences in the Area of Verb Choice

Areas of Evaluation	$E_2 - E_1$	$E_2 - C$
Verb Evaluation Score	8.91***	7.83***
"To Be" and "To Have"	-4.3**	-2.4**
Particularized Verbs	2.28***	2.27***
Generalized Verbs	0.68	1.31**
Number of Verbs/Composition	1.35	1.18
Percentage of "To Be" and "To Have"/Total Verbs	-32.0*	-28.7*
Percentage of Particularized Verbs/Total Verbs	21.9*	20.3*
Percentage of Generalized Verbs/ Total Verbs	10.2	8.5

Note: E_1 = Experimental group's pretests, E_2 = Experimental group's posttests, C = Control group's posttests

*$p < .05$.

**$p < .01$.

***$p < .001$.

Table 2

Comparison of the Mean Differences in the Areas of Syntax, Details and Holistic Evaluation

Areas of Evaluation	$E_2 - E_1$	$E_2 - C$
Sentence Fragments	-1.21*	-0.79***
Complex Sentences	0.18	0.86*
Subordinate Clauses	0.16	0.88*
Subordinate Clauses not containing "to be" or "to have" as main verbs	0.25	0.65**
T-unit ratio	-17.59	-3.67
Total Number of Nouns	-2.75	-1.03
Total Number of Adjectives	-1.3	-0.83
Ratio of Adjectives to Nouns • Adjectives (%)	0.5	-3.0
Holistic Evaluation	1.79**	2.08

*$p < .05$.

**$p < .01$.

***$p < .001$.

Table 3

The Correlation Between Holistic Evaluation Score and Verb Quantity And Verb Quality, Using Ranked-Order Data

	E_1	C	E_2
Correlation Between Holistic Evaluation Score and Number of Verbs (Quantity)	0.706***	0.61***	0.392*
Correlation Between Holistic Evaluation Score and Verb Evaluation Score (Quality)	0.085	0.284	0.58**

*$p < .05$.

**$p < .01$.

***$p < .001$.

Table 4

Mean Results in the Areas of Length and Verb Choice by Competency Score

Subareas of Evaluation	3+	4	5	6	7	8	9
Total Words/Paper	191	200	238	299	321	426	448
T-Units/Paper	16.5	17.6	18.55	24.3	26.7	31.64	34
Words/T-Unit	11.6	11.3	12.83	12.31	12.04	13.47	13.17
Verbs/Paper	32.5	33.1	37.6	48.2	51.7	65.9	59.0
Verbs/100 Words	17.0	16.5	15.8	16.1	16.1	15.5	13.2
"To Be" & "To Have"/Paper	9.2	9.15	9.65	12.4	13.65	12.09	11
"To Be" & "To Have"/100 Words	4.81	4.57	4.05	4.15	4.25	2.84	2.5
Generalized Verbs/Paper	21.25	21.2	25.45	31.85	31.15	47.45	37
Generalized Verbs/ 100 Words	11.1	10.6	10.69	10.65	10.31	11.13	8.3
Particularized Verbs/ Paper	2.05	2.75	2.45	3.9	4.9	6.36	11
Particularized Verbs/ 100 Words	1.07	1.37	1.03	1.30	1.52	1.49	2.5
Verb Repetitions/Paper	3.05	4.7	6.6	5.95	1.55	2.36	-0-
Verb Repetitions/ 100 Words	1.59	2.35	2.78	1.99	.48	.55	-0-
Verb Evaluation Score	35.1	35.05	38.4	44.6	51.25	70.27	73
% "To Be" & "To Have"	28.31	27.64	25.7	25.75	26.4	18.34	18.64
% Generalized Verbs	65.38	64.05	67.78	66.15	66.12	72.00	62.71
% Particularized Verbs	6.31	8.31	6.52	8.10	9.48	9.66	18.64